



BLIND

A PLAY
IN FOUR ACTS

Laurence Oliver

Frontispiece Woodcut by
HARRY TOWNSEND

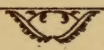


H A R P E R S





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BLIND—*A Play in Three Acts*
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FIRST EDITION

H-C





BLIND



CHARACTERS

(In the order of their appearance)

HUGH TEDDING
A FOOTMAN
JOY TEDDING
LADY TEDDING
SIR HENRY TEDDING
BETTY TEDDING
MARGARET TEDDING
PHILIP TEDDING
PERRY, A BUTLER
A MAN
A WOMAN
A DOCTOR

The Action of the Play takes place at Sir Henry Tedding's country house, on Christmas Eve in the year of our Lord 1928.

ACT I. *Scene I.* The Small Drawing Room
Scene II. The Dining Room
ACT II. A Barn
ACT III. The Hall



BLIND : A Play in Three Acts



ACT I. SCENE I.

THE Scene is an Adam room, furnished with some of the choicest products of Mr. Sheraton's craftsmanship: chairs, tables, a sofa, and an escritoire, all of satinwood. On the panelled walls (painted a pale lavender colour) there are sconces of Waterford glass fitted with electric candles, which are alight, for it is seven o'clock in the evening. An Aubusson carpet covers the floor. Wedgwood cups stand in an orderly row on the fine Adam mantel-piece. The whole is a perfect exhibition of "period" furnishing, of good taste, of style. But something is lacking, some undefinable quality; it is exquisite but

unfriendly. It is called the Small Drawing Room. A bowl of pink roses stands on the escritoire and, in honour of Christmas, a vase of holly has been placed on one of the small tables.

HUGH TEDDING, a slight but well-built man of twenty-three, is leaning on the mantelpiece, smoking a cigarette and gazing into the fire. His face in profile is strong, almost pugnacious, and decidedly attractive. When he turns full face you see that he has bright, rather wild eyes, which look straight at you, and a generous mouth. His hair is brown and innocent of grease. Being Christmas Eve, he is wearing "tails" and a white waistcoat instead of a dinner jacket, although it is only a family party.

A footman comes in, carrying a tray of cocktails, which he presents to Hugh.

HUGH

[*Looking round*] What is it?

FOOTMAN

Manhattan, sir.

HUGH

[*Taking a glass*] Thank you.

JOY TEDDING comes in (HUGH's elder sister). You see that she is tall, has beau-

ACT I: Scene I

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tiful shingled hair and a lovely dress, but, her face being made up after the modern fashion, she appears to have no age, no emotions, and no character. Actually she is twenty-five, outspoken, intelligent, self-possessed, and kind-hearted—although she does her best to hide it.

JOY

Hullo! You're down early, Hugh. [*She takes a cocktail and sits down.*]

HUGH

Yes. Why is it everybody gets changed so early in this house?

The footman puts the tray down and goes out.

JOY

Nothing else to do.

HUGH

[*Eagerly, as soon as the door is shut*] Has she agreed?

JOY

[*Blankly*] Agreed? What?

HUGH

About the baby?

JOY

Oh, Betty. . . . I don't know. I haven't had a chance to talk to her yet. Mother is ——

HUGH

I hope she has the pluck to keep it.

JOY

[*Lightly*] Don't be a fool, Hugh.

HUGH

[*Aggressively*] Well, why shouldn't she?

JOY

For several reasons. Chiefly because she doesn't want to.

HUGH

How do you know?

JOY

[*Shrugging her shoulders*] I know Betty.

HUGH

I don't believe it! It isn't natural. I know she'll want to keep it.

JOY

[*With a short laugh*] You seem to know a lot about it. Been studying motherhood?

HUGH

Oh, shut up, Joy! You know what I mean.

JOY

As far as I can understand you, you want to force Betty to keep a baby she doesn't want.

HUGH

I only want her to have a chance to keep it. I . . . It isn't fair to arrange everything like this, to expect her to agree out of hand.

JOY

[*Amused at his earnestness*] All right. But don't quarrel with me about it. Go and talk to father.

HUGH

Talk to father! You might as well talk to the Man in the Moon, for all the good it would do. He thinks that just because Betty has—has done this, he can bully and order her about like a servant.

JOY

[*Patiently*] My dear Hugh, fathers don't like their daughters to have illegitimate babies.

HUGH

I know! But—but he needn't have been so beastly.

JOY

Did you expect him to kiss her, and have the baby christened at St. Margaret's, Westminster?

HUGH

[*Flinging his cigarette into the fire*] Oh, of course you agree with him!

JOY

Don't be silly, my dear. You know I think he's been rotten about it. But you can't blame him. It was enough to make ——

HUGH

[*Interrupting with a gesture of impatience*] I know, I know!

JOY

It's no good waving your arms about and shouting "I know, I know" like that, when you don't know, or at any rate won't see. . . . No sooner does father get into the Cabinet, after years of patience and pushing, than Betty does this. You may not realise it, but Cabinet Ministers can't afford to have immoral daughters. They don't blend with Downing Street. It's been a ghastly time for father, keeping it quiet. And for mother, too.

HUGH

Mother's not so bad.

JOY

Oh, isn't she? Not quite so emphatic, perhaps, but much more determined. She'd never be able to show her face at Court if all this business came out. You don't know what that would mean for mother. She'd die of social depression.

HUGH

All the same, I think you might be decent to Betty.

JOY

My dear, of course I shall be decent. I shan't slop over her, if that's what you mean. Her Child Against the World and all that rot—oh no! I shall take her to Paris and make her buy some new hats.

LADY TEDDING *comes in, followed by her husband*, SIR HENRY TEDDING. *You know them at once.*

She is one of those tiresome middle-aged women who is always giving parties or going to parties, whom you see in the Royal Enclosure at Ascot, at the Private View of the Academy, at Westminster Abbey on great occasions, at the Oratory for important weddings, at the most select charity

bazaars and on the best political platforms; whose movements are recorded in the Morning Post and whose photograph is constantly appearing in the Sketch, Tatler or Bystander. In a very true sense, she is a Public Woman. She has a public mind, a public manner, and a public husband. Indeed, her private life consists of little else than her bed and her bath. She dresses well, but her clothes are ruined by her figure.

SIR HENRY TEDDING *is older and fatter and, if anything, less intelligent. Blessed with a lot of money, a good secretary, and no great regard for truth, he makes a successful politician. He inherited a baronetcy and has just acquired Cabinet rank. Like his son, he is wearing "tails."*

They are both agitated: in consequence her manner is carefully repressed, while his is characteristically violent.

SIR HENRY

[*As he enters*] I never heard anything like it!
The impudence! The madness!

LADY T.

[*Conciliatory by habit*] I'm sure she doesn't mean it, Henry.

SIR HENRY

Mean it? I'll soon see whether she means it.

LADY T.

Of course, Henry, of course.

SIR HENRY

She must do as I tell her, exactly as I tell her.

JOY

What's the matter?

SIR HENRY

To think of such a thing! To have the impudence! now! after everything!

LADY T.

It's only a whim. She'll think better ——

SIR HENRY

A whim? Good God! I've had enough of her whims to last me a lifetime. To keep that baby! Good God!

HUGH

[*Pleased*] Won't she agree?

LADY T.

[*Sitting down*] Yes, yes, of course she will.

SIR HENRY

She said—she had the audacity to say ——

LADY T.

I know, dear. She was a little overwrought—coming home and that sort of thing—not knowing quite what we were going to say to her.

SIR HENRY

She'll soon know what I'm going to say.

JOY

[*Smiling*] If you say it so loudly the servants will know.

SIR HENRY

[*Lowering his voice*] I won't have any nonsense or any argument about it. The baby must go to those people at once. That's my last word. I won't have any argument.

LADY T.

Of course, Henry. I'm sure she'll agree ——

SIR HENRY

Agree? She'll obey, if I know anything about it!

LADY T.

Yes, yes. Leave me to talk to her. She's a little overwrought; that's all.

SIR HENRY

Humph! [*He picks up a cocktail, smells it, and takes a sip.*]

Suddenly the room is invaded by the strains of "Adeste fideles" sung imperfectly by three treble voices:

O come, all ye faithful—

SIR HENRY

What the devil. . . .

—Joyful and—

JOY

Carol singers.

—triumphant—

LADY T.

It can't be the choir; they came last night.

—O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem—

HUGH

Village boys. [*Listening*] Three of them, I think.

—Come and behold Him—

SIR HENRY

Nothing more or less than begging! It ought to be stopped.

—Born—

HUGH

[*Defensively*] It's Christmas Eve, Father.
—*the King of Angels*—

JOY

I shouldn't mind if they could sing.
—*O come, let us adore Him*—

LADY T.

That's the worst of these old customs: they're so dreadfully abused.

—*O come, let us adore Him, O come
let us*—

I don't mind the choir coming: that's different.
—*adore Him*—

They are properly organised, and sing very nicely.
—*Christ the Lord*.

Besides, they do it for charity. The money goes to the Cottage Hospital.

God of God, Light of Light—

BETTY TEDDING *comes in*. You recognise her from her likeness to HUGH, although she is darker and better-looking—and younger, scarcely twenty-two. She has that defiant manner which often conceals a

ACT I: *Scene I*

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nervous emotional temperament. She is wearing a red dress.

—Lo! He abhors not—

SIR HENRY

[*To HUGH*] Go and make them stop that noise—for goodness' sake.

—the Virgin's womb; etc., etc., etc.

HUGH goes out, giving BETTY's arm a friendly squeeze in passing.

LADY T.

[*To BETTY*] Is your headache better?

BETTY

Yes, thank you, mother.

JOY

What a nice dress! Where did you get it?

BETTY

I bought it in London on my way down, from a little shop in Knightsbridge. Cheap—off the peg—but a good colour, isn't it?

LADY T.

[*Eyeing it with disapproval*] I think you might have chosen something quieter, something more becoming.

JOY

Nonsense, mother! It's awfully nice.

BETTY

[*Looking down at it*] I like red. [*Then suddenly realizing the significance of the colour*] Oh! I see what you mean [*smiling*]: scarlet! The Scarlet Woman!

LADY T.

[*Shocked*] Betty!

SIR HENRY

[*Exploding*] Good God!

JOY

[*Smiling, but anxious to stem the parental wrath*]
Have a cocktail? Manhattan.

BETTY

Thanks. [*She takes a glass from the tray.*]
"Adeste fideles" comes to an abrupt end.

SIR HENRY

If you haven't any shame there's no need to show it! Wearing a dress like that and—and drawing attention to it! I won't have it! You understand? I won't have it!

BETTY

[*Quietly, nervously*] I'm sorry, father. I didn't think of it till mother said . . . [*Defensively*]
You know I like red.

SIR HENRY

You seem to like all sorts of things no decent girl would like.

BETTY

I'm sorry. [*She sits down, trying to appear composed.*]

SIR HENRY

[*Taking a parental stand on the hearthrug*] I can't think what's the matter with you. Coming home like this, after having that baby—defiantly, without any shame!

LADY T.

Yes, Henry. But I don't think we want to talk about it now—just before dinner.

SIR HENRY

I don't want to talk about it at all, or to think about it, even. I feel the disgrace of it, if Betty doesn't. [*To BETTY*] You may not be ashamed of yourself, but I am. Please remember that.

BETTY

[*With a bitter laugh*] I'm not likely to forget it.

SIR HENRY

As far as I can see, you don't want to forget it, or to let anybody else forget it. On the contrary, you're doing your best to let everybody know about

it. As if I hadn't had enough anxiety trying to keep it quiet! Sending you away to that place—with a false name—bribing people right and left! I've done everything to save a scandal—to save you. The very least you can do now is to behave yourself, to do as I tell you, to remember you're my daughter—though nobody would think so.

BETTY

[*Biting her lip*] I'm sorry, father. I . . .

SIR HENRY

You ought to be! You ought to be thoroughly ashamed of yourself, instead of flaunting about in a red dress and making flippant remarks. Coming home like this . . . saying you want to keep that child! One would think you were proud of having a bastard baby!

BETTY

[*With a cry*] Don't! [*Putting her hands to her face*] Oh, don't!

LADY T.

Henry! Not that word, please!

SIR HENRY

Plain words are the only language she seems to understand.

JOY

[*Jumping up*] Don't be a bully, father.

SIR HENRY

[*Turning on her*] What?

JOY

[*Facing him*] If you bully her like this I shall start using plain words. What do you expect Betty to do? Wear sackcloth and ashes and carry a candle!

SIR HENRY

[*Furious*] I expect you to keep quiet and offer your opinion when it's asked for.

JOY

[*Shrugging her shoulders*] Then I'm afraid you'll be disappointed, father.

LADY T.

SIR HENRY } [*together*] Joy!

How dare you!

JOY

[*Unabashed*] Of course I shall "dare you!" Don't be so silly and old and parental. [*Aggressively*] You're not going to bully Betty. And you're certainly not going to bully me.

SIR HENRY *is too angry to retort.*

LADY T.

[*Severely*] Your father is upset because Betty

won't agree about the baby—after all the trouble we've taken.

JOY

[*Gently*] What do you object to, Betty?

BETTY

[*Jumping up, flushed and trembling*] Oh, do what you like with the baby! I don't care!

JOY

[*Putting her arm round her*] It's all right, dear; it's all right.

LADY T.

We have arranged for it to be taken by some very nice people. Middle class, but very nice. I really don't see what you can object to, Betty.

BETTY

[*Sullenly*] I don't know them. You won't allow me even to see them.

LADY T.

My dear! They might recognise you!

BETTY

They might be horrible—unkind—or anything.

LADY T.

Now, you needn't worry about that. Mr. James has satisfied himself that they are nice people.

BETTY

Mr. James? Who's Mr. James?

LADY T.

You know. Your father's solicitor.

BETTY

Oh. . . .

LADY T

[*Turning to Joy*] He's found some very respectable people: a man and his wife, in comfortable circumstances, with no children of their own. I am sure it couldn't be sent to a nicer home. Nobody will know; nobody can possibly find out.

BETTY

Where do they live?

LADY T.

My dear child, what does that matter?

BETTY

[*Sharply*] I want to know.

LADY T.

Surely, Betty, the less we know the better. We want to forget it, to put it clean out of our minds. The less we know, the less we shall think about it.

BETTY

[*Stubbornly*] I want to know something about them. I can't ——

SIR HENRY

[*Interrupting impatiently*] Your mother has just told you. They are decent respectable middle-class people. What more do you want?

BETTY

Have you seen them?

SIR HENRY

Of course I haven't.

LADY T.

No, I am afraid we couldn't see them ourselves. But Mr. James has arranged everything, and you may be sure he has done it all very carefully. He says the people are quite nice and quite reliable. They are ready to take the baby at once, and—and that will be the end of the matter.

BETTY

[*Twisting her fingers together*] I . . . want to see him sometimes, to see he's all right and—and—[*defiantly*] I want to see him.

LADY T.

Betty, what do you mean? You can't do that!

BETTY

[*Passionately*] Why can't I? Why should I let you take him away from me like this? I don't know where he's going or whom he's going to.

ACT I: *Scene I*

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You won't let me see him. You—you think it doesn't matter. You talk as if he were a dog instead of a baby—my baby!

SIR HENRY

You can't want it! A baby like that!

BETTY

[*With an hysterical laugh*] Can't want him! Oh! Can't want . . .

SIR HENRY

[*Livid*] Good God! After all the trouble we've taken to prevent people from knowing, to stop the servants finding out, to save a scandal, to—to . . . You must be mad!

BETTY

It's my baby! . My baby! I won't let you take him away! I won't— [*She bursts into tears and rushes out of the room.*]

SIR HENRY

There! What do you think of that?

LADY TEDDING *shuts the door.*

JOY

I think it would serve you right if she meant it.

SIR HENRY

[*Shouting*] What???

LADY T.

[*Alarmed*] Suppose she does mean it? What can we do? We can't force her to send the child away!

JOY

[*Sitting down*] No, you can't. So you had better be nice to her.

SIR HENRY

I shall get Philip to talk to her. He shall talk to her tonight. I won't stand any nonsense. She must agree.

JOY

For goodness' sake stop bullying her. As if she hasn't had enough misery already!

LADY T.

[*Snapping her lips together*] Your father is upset.

SIR HENRY

Enough to upset anybody!

JOY

If you go on being "upset," as you call it, Betty will go on being unreasonable. It's only natural.

SIR HENRY

I'll disown her! Wash my hands of her!

JOY

Make a worse scandal.

LADY T.

She *must* agree.

JOY

She will, if you'll only leave off shouting at her.
Talk to her decently. Be kind.

LADY T.

[*Moving about the room, too agitated to sit down*]
I can't forget it. My daughter—doing a thing
like that.

JOY

Yes—your daughter, my sister. That's the point.
Whatever she's done she's still Betty.

LADY T.

[*Emphatically*] But she must send that child away.
I won't have a scandal.

SIR HENRY

My daughter! Little better than—than a harlot!

LADY T.

[*Protesting*] Henry, please . . .

JOY

My dear father, you're not as pure as a lily.

SIR HENRY

[*Flabbergasted, furious and afraid of what she
may have discovered about him*] What?

JOY

It's all right. I only meant that you're a man, and therefore . . . well, scarcely a mountain of morality, shall we say?

SIR HENRY

Well I'm damned!

LADY T.

[*Scandalized*] Really, Joy!

JOY

[*Impatiently*] Then don't treat Betty as if she were something unclean, just because she's had a baby by mistake, because she's been found out.

LADY T.

[*Severely*] It's not a question of being found out, but of doing something wrong.

JOY

Wrong! What is wrong? [*Shrugging her shoulders*] Who knows?

SIR HENRY

I do, if you don't! So does your mother. And Philip and Margaret.

JOY

Oh, you've told Aunt Margaret? I hope she won't talk about it.

SIR HENRY

[*With a grunt*] She'd have nosed it out if we hadn't told her.

JOY

What did she say?

SIR HENRY

She was absolutely disgusted, as any decent person would be. Horrified!

JOY

[*Derisively*] And the next day gave a lecture on birth control.

LADY T.

Joy!

JOY

It's no good pretending to be shocked, mother. You know she's crazy about birth control.

LADY T. [*Delicately*]

She is interested in the subject. Many people are, very nice people—in a social and scientific way. But there's no need for you to mention it as if—as if ——

JOY

As if it might apply to Betty? That's exactly what I meant. If only Betty ——

SIR HENRY

Be quiet! I won't have this loose talk!

JOY

[*Sweetly*] Not loose, father—scientific.

SIR HENRY

I won't stand it! I won't stand it! [*He stamps across the room and is about to open the door when it is flung back in his face, and HUGH comes in, nearly colliding with him.*]

HUGH

I'm sorry.

SIR HENRY

[*Glaring at him*] I was always taught to enter a room, not to burst in! [*He goes out slamming the door.*]

LADY T.

Oh dear, oh dear! [*She hurries out after him.*]

HUGH looks at the door and then at Joy, amused and amazed. Then they both burst out laughing.

HUGH

[*Singing*] O come, all ye faithful, joyful and—
What a lovely Christmas we're going to have!
[*Then suddenly, with a change of manner*] Oh,

tell me: Is she going to stick her toes in and keep the baby?

JOY [*Guardedly*]

I don't know. She's all hot and bothered at the moment.

HUGH

She wants to keep it; I know she wants to keep it!

JOY

My dear Hugh, she can't. It would ruin her.

HUGH

Let her decide for herself. Don't interfere with her.

JOY

How could we have a baby—a little by-blow—screaming all over the place, giving us away to everybody?

HUGH

[*Scornfully*] Giving us away! That's all you care about—what people think.

JOY

No, what they say.

HUGH

You're as bad as mother—talking about the Reputation of the Family. Who's cares a fig about reputation nowadays?

JOY

[*Smiling*] You're very young, Hughie.

HUGH

[*Petulantly*] Don't call me Hughie.

JOY

It suits you, dear; it's so sentimental.

HUGH

Shut up!

JOY

The way you slop over this illegitimate baby . . .

HUGH

Illegitimate or not, it's Betty's baby.

JOY

That's the trouble. If it were somebody else's I'd join hands with you and say, "How romantic!" or any old thing you like. But Betty's! Oh no! It's far too intimate. Free love is all very well—but not in one's own family.

HUGH

[*Thrusting his fingers through his hair*] Free love! My God!

JOY

With a chauffeur too.

HUGH

[*Viciously*] That swine! I'd like to kill him!

JOY

A very good-looking swine.

HUGH

He wouldn't be if I got hold of him.

JOY

[*Dryly*] He's bigger than you—and on his way to Australia.

HUGH

He ought to be on his way to hell!

JOY

Nonsense, my dear! It was Betty's fault. She admitted ——

HUGH

[*Hotly*] He took advantage of her. He ——

JOY

She took advantage of him, you mean. You ought to know Betty well enough for that. She played the tune; he merely danced to it.

HUGH

Anyhow, he's a rotten little cad, or he wouldn't have let father buy him off as he did.

JOY

Five hundred pounds and a job in Australia are

very tempting to a chauffeur who earns four pounds a week. . . .

HUGH

[*Giving it up*] Oh, I don't know! It's horrible—the whole business. . . . If only father would leave her alone. . . .

JOY

He will—as soon as the baby's out of the way. No man can keep up a conscience for long, even about other people's sins.

HUGH

Why shouldn't she keep it?

JOY

Because . . . Well, I don't want to hear people say: "Joy Tedding. Oh, don't you know? Her sister had an affair with a chauffeur. Awful scandal! A baby, too! Expect she's as bad, if the truth were known!"

HUGH

[*Contemptuously*] You're a rotten little snob, that's all I can say.

JOY

Of course I am. So are you. So's everybody.

HUGH

[*Nettled*] I'm not! I don't care if—

JOY

Suppose Betty had married him?

HUGH

Well? If she'd wanted to marry him . . .

JOY

You'd have taken him to your club and introduced him to your friends, of course? My brother-in-law the chauffeur!

HUGH

That's different.

JOY [*Smiling*]

It always is.

HUGH

[*Wearily*] Oh, shut up, Joy! We've done nothing but quarrel since all this business started. The whole lot of us! My God! And when it all comes down to brass tacks, it's the scandal. Not Betty, not what she's done, but what people may find out.

JOY

At least we might be nice to each other on Christmas Eve.

HUGH

[*With a hard laugh*] Christmas Eve! "Unto us

a child is given—"! And we're doing our damndest to get rid of it.

JOY

[*Smiling*] Tell Uncle Philip that, and see what he says.

HUGH

Pah! He'd talk about "the light of modern evidence." I wonder he has the cheek to stay in the Church.

The dinner gong sounds.

JOY

[*Getting up*] Come along, dearie; come and face the family. [*With sudden inspiration*] I know, Hugh! Let's rag them tonight. Let's be anti-religious and anti-social and anti-everything. It'll serve them right for being so horrid to Betty.

HUGH

It won't be ragging, for my part. I'm feeling pretty Anti, I can tell you. What a trio! Father and Philip and Margaret: a politician, a parson, and a . . . [*hesitating*]

JOY

[*Laughing*] . . . a scientific spinster! [*She moves towards the door.*]

HUGH

[*Intensely bitter*] Without a spark of sense or feeling among the lot of them! Oh, I don't mean that, but . . . if they'd only be decent to Betty! I . . . [*In an outburst*] My God! Whatever made her do it? She must have been mad!

JOY

[*Naïvely*] But she might have been careful!

END OF SCENE I

NOTE.—There should be no interval between this Scene and the next.

Scene II

The Scene is the dining room, about half an hour later. They are all seated at a long polished table having dinner: SIR HENRY at one end (showing his right profile) with AUNT MARGARET on his right and HUGH on his left, LADY TEDDING at the other end, with UNCLE PHILIP on her right and BETTY on her left, JOY between HUGH and UNCLE PHILIP. They are served by a middle-aged butler and two young footmen. The table is richly decorated with mauve orchids, and lit by two candelabra of antique silver,

the candles beneath pale yellow shades. On the shadowed walls hang large oil-paintings of ancient Teddings. The fireplace is on the left, the door on the right. In the middle of the wall, beyond the table, are French windows, heavily curtained.

UNCLE PHILIP, *otherwise* THE VERY REVEREND PHILIP CUNNINGHAM TEDDING, C.V.O., D.D., F.R.S., *Dean of Bicester and Fellow of All Souls*, is one of those elderly and courtly clerics who are the pride and glory of the Church of England; who read the Lessons so well and look so handsome in their stiff gold-and-velvet-brocaded copes—worn, of course, only on great occasions, when royalty attend or when God is to be honoured for a successful war. Some very charming old ladies in Bicester call him “saintly”; some very vulgar tradespeople call him “unctuous”—or words to that effect. He is a year younger than his brother, SIR HENRY.

AUNT MARGARET, *otherwise* DAME MARGARET AUGUSTA TEDDING, G.B.E., is a tall angular spinster with prominent features and fifty-nine years to her credit, being the senior of her brothers by two and three years, respectively. She has never loved anybody or anything, and it is highly improbable that since her childhood anybody has ever loved her.

She is a great slum worker—that is to say, she spends most of her time organising schemes for the betterment of the poor and generally poking her hideous nose into the lives of all those battered, beaten, defenceless, poverty-stricken people who live huddled together in the dark corners of our cities, living emblems of Progress, Education, Enlightenment, Modern Science, Industrialism, and all the God-forsaken gimcrack ideals of a morbid age. She prides herself on being Advanced (as most of them do), though in what direction she is advancing or what goal she hopes to reach, God alone knows. Needless to say, she is an ardent advocate of Prohibition and birth control.

Dinner is well advanced; the plum pudding served. They are all drinking champagne, with the exception of MARGARET, who has a glass of water by her plate.

PHILIP

It is a remarkable thing how Christmas touches the imagination. Ever since I was a child I have looked forward to it and enjoyed it. Do you remember, Margaret, the old Christmases at home?

MARGARET

[*Smiling*] I remember that you always over-ate yourself.

PHILIP

[*With a deep musical laugh, of which he is vain*]
So did Henry!

MARGARET

He does now. Look at him! He's getting disgracefully fat. You ought to diet him, Edith.

SIR HENRY

[*Laughing*] I suppose you'd like me to live on nuts?

MARGARET

You can jeer at vegetarianism, Henry, but it's the only way to be really healthy. Meat and drink are the curse of this country.

JOY

Why worry about health? It's much more amusing to enjoy life.

PHILIP

It is certainly a mistake to be over-careful of one's self.

MARGARET

That slovenly unscientific attitude, Philip, is just what hinders progress. Health is the first thing.

I'm always telling the people in the East End—
but they won't listen.

LADY T.

I'm afraid they're more inclined to listen to these
dreadful Bolsheviks.

SIR HENRY

Yes! Now, Margaret, if you'd only turn your
attention to Bolshevism ——

MARGARET

But surely you must see that our work is the finest
antidote to Bolshevism?

LADY T.

It is splendid work, I must say.

MARGARET

By teaching them to be clean and sober, and turn-
ing their minds to self-improvement, we are fight-
ing Bolshevism far more effectively than you poli-
ticians, Henry.

SIR HENRY

[*Shrugging his shoulders*] I don't know. . . .
The more you do for the working classes the more
they want.

MARGARET

Progress! That is the great thing. Bring the

poor into harmony with science, and there'll be nothing to fear.

PHILIP

Lady Hurstwood was talking to me only last week about your Bethnal Green Centre. Most interesting! She said you were making great strides there.

MARGARET

Yes. We've got the children to clean their teeth at last. And the mothers are all pledged to stop giving their babies those horrid rubber things to suck—"dummies" they call them. If only we could close the public houses! Force the men to stop drinking!

HUGH

That's the only pleasure the poor devils get.

MARGARET

Pleasure? Pleasure is the ruin of the poor.

SIR HENRY

Quite right, Margaret.

MARGARET

How can they hope to improve themselves when they waste their time and ruin their health in cinemas and public houses?

JOY

[*Lightly*] Perhaps they don't want to improve themselves.

MARGARET

[*Emphatically*] Then they should be made to.

HUGH

Depends what you call improvement. D'you think it's fair to rob them of their liberty for the sake of cleaning their teeth?

SIR HENRY

You talk the most arrant nonsense, Hugh.

HUGH

[*To his father*] How would you like somebody to come pushing his way into your house to tell you to wash your neck, or to stop drinking beer, or to send your children to school?

MARGARET

But we "push our way in," as you call it, in order to help these poor people.

HUGH

Yes, but you're so *determined* to help them. You bully them.

PHILIP

[*Benignly*] Giving them free meals and free coal and free education—is that bullying?

SIR HENRY

[*With a snort*] Bullying!

HUGH

No, that's bribing them. But it's all much the same. The police bully them to send their children to day school, and you bribe them to send their children to Sunday school.

MARGARET

What ridiculous ideas you have, Hugh! Do you want us to give up slum work, to do nothing for the betterment of the poor?

HUGH

I think the poor should be respected, just as much as the rich. We've no right to go poking our noses into their bedrooms and interfering with their children.

PHILIP

[*Gravely*] As Christians, Hugh, we are bound to look after them—the poor and the needy. I think your ideas are rather uncharitable.

JOY

[*Brightly*] I know, Hugh! We'll go down to Whitechapel and start a scheme for the betterment of the rich. Imagine a couple of washerwomen doing a little district visiting in Mayfair, telling

ACT I: *Scene II*

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the dear old ladies that rouge is bad for their complexions and that wigs are insanitary!

Dessert has been reached: port and sherry stand on the table before SIR HENRY.

SIR HENRY

[*To the butler*] You needn't stay any longer, Perry.

PERRY

Thank you, sir.

SIR HENRY

You remember our old custom, Philip, on Christmas Eve? To let the servants go, and not to let the ladies run away from the port. [*He starts the wine on its sacred journey round the table.*]

PERRY signs to the footmen, and they go out. He is about to follow them when he stops, as though remembering something, and returns to SIR HENRY's chair.

PHILIP

Very nice, these little distinctions at Christmas. They keep up the right spirit.

LADY T.

The servants like it, you know.

SIR HENRY

[*Looking up*] Yes, Perry?

PERRY

If you please, sir, I have taken the liberty of allowing a tramp and his wife to sleep in the wood barn.

They all cease eating and talking to listen to PERRY.

SIR HENRY

What?

PERRY

They came just as we were about to serve dinner. They asked if they might sleep in an outhouse or somewhere—only for the night, of course. The woman had a child—a baby, sir. [*Feeling that SIR HENRY is displeased*] I thought that—that we couldn't very well refuse, sir. I hope you don't mind, sir?

BETTY

[*Quickly*] A baby?

PERRY

Yes, Miss Betty—a little baby.

MARGARET

Fancy carrying a baby about on a winter's night! It's scandalous.

LADY T.

[*Perturbed*] You say the man is a tramp?

PERRY

Yes, my lady, I think so. He's very dark, rather like a gipsy.

LADY T.

[*Alarmed*] A gipsy!

PERRY

Of course I don't know, my lady. That is only what you might call a surmise.

SIR HENRY

Didn't you question him? Find out who he was and where he'd come from? What's the woman doing with him? How do you know she's his wife?

PERRY

I don't know, sir. But it seems natural—if I may say so, sir.

SIR HENRY

[*Sharply*] You should have found out all about them first.

PERRY

I'm sorry sir. They—they looked very tired. They must have tramped for miles.

SIR HENRY

We ought to know what they're doing, wandering about the country like this, begging, with a baby.

. . . They ought to give a proper account of themselves.

LADY T.

They might be anything! With all these Bolsheviks about! Coming to the house of a Cabinet Minister!

MARGARET

Why didn't they go on to Banbury? It's only four miles. There's a workhouse there.

PHILIP

It certainly sounds suspicious.

SIR HENRY

[*Severely*] You should have got my permission, Perry, before you did this.

PERRY

I'm sorry, sir. I thought you wouldn't mind, and I didn't want to disturb you just at the beginning of dinner. You see, the woman had a baby, sir.

SIR HENRY

You have mentioned that fact already.

PERRY

Yes, sir.

SIR HENRY

Well, it's done now. I suppose we must let them

stay. But I don't like it. Be sure to lock up carefully tonight.

PERRY

Oh, yes, sir.

SIR HENRY

How did they get here—get past the lodge, I mean?

PERRY

Stewart and his wife are away, sir. You gave them permission ——

SIR HENRY

So I did, so I did.

PERRY

There's nobody at the lodge tonight.

SIR HENRY

[*Dismissing him*] All right. Be sure to lock up carefully.

PERRY

Yes, sir. [*He bows and makes for the door.*]

HUGH

Perry!

PERRY

[*Stopping*] Yes, sir?

HUGH

You've given them plenty of food and made them comfortable?

SIR HENRY *frowns at him.*

PERRY

Oh, yes, sir. We've given them a good meal—
[*smiling*] and plum pudding, sir.

JOY

What about blankets and that sort of thing?

HUGH

Take my old army blankets—if you can find them.

PERRY

Thank you, sir. I think I know where they are.

HUGH

Good.

PERRY *goes out.*

LADY T.

Perry is getting very officious.

SIR HENRY

Yes. I must speak to him.

MARGARET

I expect those people are humbugs. They ——

SIR HENRY

Tramps! Did you ever know a tramp who wasn't a humbug?

LADY T.

It's really a mistake to help that class of person.

PHILIP

Yes; I'm afraid it encourages them to go on begging.

HUGH

[*Ironically*] The poor and the needy, Uncle Philip!

PHILIP

[*Quickly*] The deserving poor, certainly. That's a very different matter. But these people who tramp about, begging and often stealing—you can't say they deserve anything. We must discriminate in our charity.

HUGH

But it's not charity to help people who deserve help. That's only common justice. If you deserve a thing you ought to get it. It's yours by right. Charity, surely, is giving people something they don't deserve? Like God forgiving sin, shall we say?

SIR HENRY

You have some outrageous ideas, Hugh. Pass Philip the port.

JOY

If you stopped to think whether people deserve things, you'd give nothing to nobody.

MARGARET

But you must stop to think. That's where all the harm's done. You mustn't act on emotional impulse. You must help the poor scientifically. You see ——

BETTY

[*Interrupting in a weary voice*] Must we be scientific on Christmas Eve?

PHILIP

[*In his playful manner, which is such a success at garden parties*] No, Betty; you are quite right. This is not the time for science or argument; it is the time for good cheer. I wish we had some crackers and a snapdragon. Don't you?

MARGARET

You're a silly old sentimentalist.

PHILIP

[*Wagging his finger at her*] Rats to you, Sister Margaret! Sentiment is the most beautiful thing in the world. It brings people together when everything else fails. Look how the sentiment of Christmas brings us all together, high and low,

rich and poor—all united by the spiritual significance of birth!

JOY

[*Intentionally*] I hate Christmas.

PHILIP

My dear child, why?

SIR HENRY

Joy likes to be modern.

JOY

No, merely natural.

PHILIP

But why don't you like Christmas?

JOY

[*Casually*] Oh . . . it's so frowsty. All food and family.

LADY T.

That's not a very nice thing to say—in front of us all.

PHILIP

If you say that, Joy, you condemn the fundamental instincts of mankind. The hearth and the home! That is what Christmas stands for.

HUGH

[*Leading him on*] What about the doctrine of Christmas?

PHILIP

That is the doctrine, my dear Hugh.

HUGH

Oh! Oh! Isn't that just the sentiment?

PHILIP

Well, doctrine is very largely a matter of sentiment. Certain traditional ideas appeal to the imagination and—and we accept them.

MARGARET

[*Tauntingly*] With our minds?

PHILIP

With our hearts, shall we say?

MARGARET

Really, Philip, you get worse! We shall never make any headway while people cling to all these dreadful superstitions. Now, be honest: Do you believe in the Virgin birth?

SIR HENRY

What a question to ask a man while he's drinking port!

MARGARET

He shouldn't be drinking it.

SIR HENRY

[*Laughing*] For goodness' sake don't start on Prohibition!

MARGARET

[*Smiling but serious*] I should if I thought I could convert you.

LADY T.

I can quite see that Prohibition would be a good thing for the working classes.

MARGARET

Well, Philip? What about the Virgin birth?

PHILIP

[*Evasively*] It is a beautiful tradition.

MARGARET

[*Accusingly*] Is it true?

PHILIP

[*Blandly*] I might retort by saying, What is truth?

MARGARET

And I might say you were hedging.

LADY T.

I can never understand why people argue about religion. One must believe in something, I suppose. But if you start thinking about it, you always end by disbelieving it. It's so much better just to believe.

MARGARET

Edith! You're as bad as Philip.

JOY

Why must you believe in something, mother? It seems to me so dreadfully weak-minded. It's like a kitchen maid who tries to forget the kitchen by reading stories about dukes and duchesses.

SIR HENRY

Humph! Is that your idea of religion? What about fearing God and behaving like a gentleman?

JOY

[*Flippantly*] I find it more practical to fear false teeth and to go to the dentist regularly.

HUGH and BETTY *laugh*.

LADY T.

[*Shocked*] Joy!

PHILIP

Come, come. . . .

MARGARET

Quite right, quite right, Joy. If people took proper care of their bodies and didn't worry about their souls they'd be far happier.

PHILIP

[*Reprovingly*] It's all very well for you to talk like this when you are sitting round a table, enjoying good health and a good dinner. But sup-

pose we were all on board ship now, in a terrible storm. Suppose the ship was sinking in mid-Atlantic, and there was no possible hope of our being saved. Would you talk like this? Would you think like this? Wouldn't you instinctively do what you now profess to despise? Wouldn't you offer up a prayer?

JOY

[*Thoughtfully*] Yes . . . I expect I should.

PHILIP

[*Triumphantly*] There! That is the answer to all you have said.

JOY

But that doesn't prove Christianity; that merely proves cowardice. I shouldn't be fearing God and behaving like a lady. I should be fearing death and behaving like a lunatic.

MARGARET

[*Crowing*] It's no good, Philip; you can't put us off with sentiment and superstition. We want truth.

SIR HENRY

That's all very well, Margaret; but it's a mistake to go probing about and upsetting things.

LADY T.

Why not take religion as you find it? It's so much more satisfactory.

HUGH

It's not a question of finding it, mother, but of finding it out!

BETTY

[*Wearily*] What does it all matter, anyhow? It doesn't make us any different.

LADY T.

[*Pointedly*] It should, Betty.

SIR HENRY

[*To MARGARET*] Pass the port, please.

HUGH

May we smoke?

SIR HENRY

All right, ruin your port if you want to!

HUGH and JOY light cigarettes; BETTY refuses.

PHILIP

Who can say for certain what is true or what is false? We are all like children groping in the dark. We can but go forward, following the high-

est when we recognise it, keeping our minds open, always striving and seeking.

SIR HENRY *yawns*.

HUGH

But ——

PHILIP

You ask me do I believe in the Virgin birth? You might as well ask me do I believe in the legend of King Arthur? I believe both stories to the extent that they are beautiful stories, expressing beautiful ideals. There are similar legends in every race and in every religion. They are the poetic expression of some strange and mystical truth which we can but dimly comprehend.

LADY T.

[*Impressed*] Yes, Philip; I think you explain it all beautifully.

HUGH

[*Impatiently*] But that's all so vague. It ——

JOY

It doesn't help us a bit. When it's all boiled down it's only a lump of sentimentality. You can't expect us go to church before breakfast just for the sake of a poetic expression.

HUGH

Is Christianity true? That's what we want to know. If it's only a pretty story, it—well, it's just silly.

JOY

Worse than that. It's wicked, because it stops people from having a good time.

LADY T.

I wish you wouldn't say such dreadful things, Joy.

PHILIP

It is all a question of values, my dear Joy. Some of us value beautiful ideals more than what you call "a good time."

HUGH

But if they are false ideals? If they are lies—big puffed-up lies—what then? A lie can't be beautiful. A false ideal can be of no value. It's like looking at a wig and exclaiming, "What beautiful hair!"

SIR HENRY

[*Amused*] What do you say to that, Philip?

PHILIP

If you will listen to me for a moment I can say a great deal. The Creed of the Christian Church

MARGARET

[*Interrupting*] That's no good, Philip! We want something more reliable than a creed.

PHILIP

[*Nettled, but trying not to show it*] Very well. Let us suppose that the Creed of the Church is utterly untrue. [*He stops to sip his port and marshal his arguments.*] I admit that the doctrine has changed. It must of necessity change as we learn more and more from science. The old barbaric beliefs of the Fall, of the Atonement, of heaven and hell, are manifestly false. They offend the highest instincts of mankind. They savour of animalism. But let us suppose that the whole creed is false—false, I mean, not only in terms and—er—phraseology, but false in the ideal it presents. Let us suppose, as it's very reasonable to suppose, that Christ was merely a man; that the Resurrection is a myth. I don't mean the story of the empty tomb and the bodily resurrection, which, of course, no intellectual Christian can seriously believe in the light of modern evidence. I mean the mystical Resurrection which the beautiful legend of Easter expresses: the triumph of the soul over death. Let us, I say, suppose that these funda-

mental beliefs are false. Is Christianity condemned? No, most emphatically no. For the ethical code which Christ gave us is obviously the highest and best. Brotherliness, sympathy, fair dealing—all these ideals come from Christianity, are, indeed, Christianity. Our civilization, our progress, our education, our humane conceptions of men and women, our love for little children, our kindness to animals——

BETTY

[*With a sudden laugh*] Our love for little children!

LADY T.

[*Reprovingly*] Betty!

HUGH

[*Derisively*] Our civilisation! What about unemployment?

SIR HENRY

Don't be silly. That's economics.

HUGH

[*With a gesture of his right hand*] Well, if Christianity is responsible for our civilisation, as Uncle Philip says, then it must be responsible for our economics. [*In trying to emphasise the last words he upsets his glass of port.*]

SIR HENRY

Damn it, look what you're doing! If you must be a socialist, there's no need to waste good port!

HUGH

[*Mopping up the mess with his table napkin*] I'm sorry.

MARGARET

If we would only deal with these problems scientifically —

JOY

I agree with Hugh. Our civilisation is nothing to boast about. What's the good of being kind to animals when you herd human beings into slums? Besides, brotherliness is a very tiresome business. Christ has got to be a very big God before I'll consent to love my neighbour as myself.

LADY T.

[*Shocked*] Joy!

PHILIP

[*Gravely*] It is not a question of the divinity of Christ. It is a question of the moral code which he taught and which has come down to us through the ages. You can't escape from tradition.

HUGH

But you have, you yourself! You have scrapped the traditional doctrine. So why make a fuss about the morals? Why on earth should we obey this moral code if it rests on nothing more solid than tradition—half of which you deny? No. All this Christian business of being fair and forgiving your enemies and being faithful to one woman won't stand up without a mighty strong backing. It's no use telling us to be good because you think being good is the highest ideal in the world. High ideals are often pure poppycock. It's no use telling us that a very fine man called Christ said this and that and got killed into the bargain. I'm quite ready to believe that he was fine, but I'm not ready to believe that he was right—merely because he was good. Why should he be right if he was only a man?

PHILIP

I didn't say that, Hugh.

HUGH

[*Throwing down the gauntlet*] Then is Christ God?

PHILIP

[*Hesitatingly*] In a sense, yes. One cannot dog-

matise, but I believe, and I think that a scientific study of the Scriptures leads any thoughtful man to the same belief—I believe that Christ stood in a very special relation to God. That he was, as the Bible says, the Son of God—in a mystical sense, of course.

HUGH

I'm afraid I can't make head or tail of all that. Could he make mistakes?

PHILIP

[*Choosing his words*] Well, of course, he was bounded by the thought and traditions of his time. He may have made mistakes. He probably did.

HUGH

Good Heavens! And on that half-hearted, non-committal, catch-as-catch-can belief you expect us to be Christians, to be moral, to do those things we don't want to do and to leave undone those things we do want to do? Why, on your own showing, the Bible is as doubtful as a rotten history book! You don't believe one-half of it yourself, so how can you expect us to believe any of it?

LADY T.

[*Protesting*] Hugh! . . .

PHILIP

Faith! That is what you boys don't understand.
Faith!

HUGH

Oh, Uncle Philip! Faith in something which isn't true? That won't do for my religion. I want something certain, like—like a woman having a baby. Something as glaring as electric light, as—as unmistakable as a mountain.

LADY T.

I must say it would be easier if—if we could see something—a miracle—something we couldn't mistake.

MARGARET

Yes. If God is what Christianity pretends—all-powerful and all-loving—he ought to *show* us, instead of leaving us to worry over the Bible.

BETTY

[Suddenly, rudely, in sharp contrast to the politely argumentative manner of the rest] You wouldn't believe it if He did. You won't believe anything you don't like.

They all turn to her in amazement.

SIR HENRY

[Sharply] What do you mean, Betty?

BETTY

[*Rising and facing them defiantly*] It's true! You won't believe anything you don't like. You—you won't believe I want to keep my baby. [*She flings herself away from the table, knocking her chair over.*]

HUGH jumps up; but he stands hesitating and tongue-tied, not knowing what to do or say. There is a tense pause. PHILIP studies his plate. MARGARET takes a sip of water.

LADY T.

[*Severely*] Betty, come and sit down.

BETTY

[*Swinging round*] You talk about Christianity! Talk! And you want to get rid of my baby!

LADY T.

This is not the time to discuss that, Betty.

BETTY

Why not? It's more important than all your nonsense about God.

JOY

[*Going to her, coaxingly*] Come and sit down, darling. [*She puts her arm round her and leads her back to the table*]

SIR HENRY

[*Kindly*] All right, Betty. If you want to discuss it, we will. [*Indicating HUGH's chair*] Sit here by me. [*He exchanges glances with his wife.*]

HUGH *steps aside and BETTY sits down in his chair. JOY stands with her hand on her sister's shoulder, protectingly.*

LADY T.

[*Gently*] We want to be reasonable, dear. If your father was angry with you just now—before dinner—it was only because he was a little upset.

SIR HENRY

[*Patting her arm*] You mustn't take any notice of my temper, Betty.

BETTY

[*Looking up at JOY and touching her hand*] I'm all right, Joy, thanks. Don't worry.

JOY *sits down beside her.*

HUGH *comes round the table and picks up the chair BETTY knocked over. Then he wanders off round the room and leans on the mantel-piece.*

SIR HENRY

I know you think I'm being unkind, but really I'm trying to do everything for your own good. After

this wretched business you're naturally upset. Your nerves are played out. I don't want you to act on a wild impulse and live to regret it ever afterwards.

BETTY

But ——

SIR HENRY

[*Stopping her*] If you'll let yourself think about it, quietly and reasonably, you'll see that I'm right. What would your life be worth if everybody knew you had an illegitimate child? You couldn't go anywhere or do anything or—or get married. It isn't as if you were a—an ordinary girl. A Ted-ding, my daughter. . . . You would be ostracised by all decent people. You would have to go abroad and hide yourself—live in some poky little town in France or Italy or somewhere.

BETTY

But ——

LADY T.

And then, I am sure, dear, you will also think of us a little. Your father a member of the Government. Joy. Myself. I should feel it very deeply. And, of course, your Uncle Philip in the Church.

BETTY

But ——

PHILIP

We are often deceived by our emotions, Betty. We think we are being splendid when we are only being foolish. Your duty, quite clearly, is to send the baby away, to put it right out of your life. As your father says, it is for your own sake. It is a duty you owe to your future happiness. My dear Betty, "To your own self be true ——"

MARGARET

It's quite understandable, your wanting to keep the child—the instinct of motherhood. But think, Betty; be guided by reason.

BETTY

[*After a pause, quietly, with a note of pleading in her voice*] But I can't let him go altogether . . . to be some other woman's child . . . to give him away like—like a kitten.

SIR HENRY

Come, Betty; think for a moment seriously. Think of the disgrace. Your future. This child always there to remind you!

BETTY

[*Bitterly*] Do you think I can forget?

SIR HENRY

No, not while you keep thinking about this child.

BETTY

[*Shaking her head*] You don't understand. You can't think of it apart from—from how I got it.

SIR HENRY

[*Raising his eyebrows*] Well—naturally!

BETTY

You see, it's something quite different. [*Trying to explain herself*] It . . . it's my baby, me! [*Turning to LADY TEDDING appealingly*] Mother, you know. You know what I mean?

LADY T.

[*Touched in spite of herself*] Yes, my dear. . . .

PHILIP

[*In his sympathetic manner*] Motherhood. . . .
Ah yes. . . .

LADY T.

[*Recollecting herself*] But as Philip said just now, you mustn't trust to your feelings. You must be guided by duty, by the duty you owe to yourself—and to us. It may sound hard, but the one thing that really matters about this child is—is how you came by it.

BETTY *flinches but says nothing.*

LADY T.

It is very painful to talk about it. But I want you to see clearly—everything. You were always too ready to give way to your feelings. My dear Betty, we can never afford to give way, none of us. Our feelings are always dangerous, and very often wrong. They lead us into all sorts of trouble, just as they led you into this.

PHILIP

Yes, Betty. You must be guided by something higher than your emotions. You must look to the things that matter: your happiness, your place in the world, your family. You have caused your dear mother much unhappiness, and you have suffered yourself. Now, you must put it behind you, forget it like a bad dream and start life again as if all this had never happened.

SIR HENRY

I'm ready to forgive you and—and forget all about it.

HUGH

[*Makes a sudden impulsive movement towards the table and blurts out*] Why can't she —— [*then stops.*]

SIR HENRY

[*Looking round*] Yes?

HUGH

Nothing. . . . But I do think ——

JOY

[*Stopping him*] You must let Betty decide for herself.

HUGH

[*Turning back to the fireplace*] Oh, all right!
[*Meaningly*] But let her decide.

LADY T.

[*To BETTY*] We all want to forget it, dear. But how can we if you keep that baby?

SIR HENRY

After all the trouble we have taken to protect you, to stop people from finding out. . . .

LADY T.

However careful you might be, you couldn't hide it—a girl as well known as you, a Tedding. Think what your life would be! Think of the disgrace!

SIR HENRY

Disgrace for all of us. We should suffer as much as you.

BETTY

[*Wearily, keeping her eyes on her plate*] I know.

. . . I've made a mess of things . . . given you a lot of trouble . . . I'm sorry, very sorry, mother. I don't want to—to make things worse . . . for my own sake, too. . . .

HUGH *looks round from the fire, hanging on her words.*

BETTY

Perhaps you're right . . . I must send it away.

With a sigh of relief SIR HENRY *leans back in his chair.* HUGH *stands staring at her like a hurt child.* JOY *touches her arm caressingly.*

MARGARET

[*Briskly*] That's right, Betty. Very sensible.

LADY T.

[*Finding her voice*] Thank you dear. I felt sure you would agree when you realised everything. [*She gets up and goes round the table towards her.*]

SIR HENRY

[*Patting her arm*] You're a good girl, Betty. I promise you nothing more shall be said about it. Directly after Christmas, Joy shall take you away for a long holiday—Paris and the south of France. I'll see you have a good time, after all this.

PHILIP

[*Benignly*] Yes, yes. You must have a good holiday, my dear child. Bury the past and start life afresh. A new life with the New Year!

LADY T.

[*Kissing her*] Then we can tell Mr. James?

BETTY

[*Looking up, puzzled*] What?

LADY T.

We can have it sent from the nursing home to those nice people Mr. James has found? It will be much better to do it at once, won't it, dear?

BETTY

[*Startled*] Oh. . . . [*Collecting herself*] Yes—all right. . [*In a hard voice*] Get it over and done with.

HUGH

[*Striding to the French windows*] God! it's hot in here! [*He flings back the curtains and opens the window.*]

JOY

[*Pretending to shiver*] Brrr!

SIR HENRY

[*Protesting*] Hugh! Not too much. We don't want pneumonia.

HUGH

[*Looking out at the black starless night*] There isn't a breath of wind.

PHILIP

[*Getting up*] No, one can hardly believe it's a winter's night. So mild. [*He goes to the window.*]

MARGARET

It feels almost like thunder.

SIR HENRY

Thunder? What nonsense, Margaret! At Christmas?

MARGARET

Quite possible. Don't you remember ——
PERRY comes in.

LADY T.

Yes, that terrible thunderstorm, Henry, when we were staying at Chequers.

PERRY

Shall I serve coffee here or in the hall, my lady?

LADY T.

Oh, in the hall, Perry.

JOY and BETTY sit close together, talking,
taking no notice of the others.

PERRY goes out.

PHILIP

[*To HUGH*] What is that light?

HUGH

Where?

PHILIP

[*Pointing*] There. Don't you see it flickering?

HUGH

Oh yes. . . . [*Stepping outside to see better*] I wonder what it is. [*With sudden enlightenment*] Oh, of course! It's those tramps—in the wood barn. They've got a candle alight there.

BETTY and JOY look round, interested.

MARGARET

Those people . . . [*She gets up and goes to look out.*]

LADY T.

[*Turning to see*] I hope they won't set the place on fire!

SIR HENRY

[*Getting up*] I must speak to Perry about it. [*He goes to the window.*]

MARGARET

I'm sure there's thunder about.

SIR HENRY

Nonsense! Nonsense!

JOY

[*Suddenly*] I've got an idea! Let's go down to the wood barn to see our guests.

They all turn to her.

JOY

Take them a Christmas Box, and be hearty with the baby!

LADY T.

[*Smiling*] Don't be silly, dear.

HUGH

[*Laughing*] Yes. Why not?

SIR HENRY

[*With a snort*] What an idea!

MARGARET

I should certainly like to see them. I expect the child is most unhealthy—dragged about the country like this.

JOY

Yes, let's all go!

SIR HENRY

Ridiculous!

HUGH

It's Christmas Eve. We can afford to be ridiculous.

PHILIP

I think it would be rather nice—to go and say a few words, to remind them of Christmas.

BETTY

[*Satirically*] We might sing carols to them.

LADY T.

[*Making a move for the door*] At any rate, let's have coffee first. Afterwards, if you like.

END OF ACT I



ACT II

THE Scene is a barn, old but well kept, with that comfortable friendly feeling peculiar to farm buildings. It is used as a wood store. At the back is a stout oak door, made in two sections, the lower half shut, the upper half wide open. On a pile of straw, flattened out, a woman is seated with her back to a stack of logs so that she is sheltered from the door. She is rocking a baby in her arms, wrapped in an old shawl. At her feet a man lies full length, asleep. All this is seen by the light of two candles: one on the ground stuck in a bottle near the man, the other in a saucer-shaped candlestick on top of the wood-

stack, so that, although feeble, the light is well distributed.

She is a young, strong-looking woman, very shabby and rather dirty. On her head, tied under her chin, is a bright blue cotton handkerchief. The man is older, dark, with a black, unkempt beard.

WOMAN

[Singing and rocking the baby in her arms]

As I sat on a sunny bank
A sunny bank, a sunny bank,
I saw three ships come sailing by
On Christmas Day in the morning.

I saw three ships come sailing by,
Come sailing by, come sailing by,
I saw three ships come sailing by.
On Christmas Day in the morning.

HUGH and JOY come tiptoe up to the door, smiling and listening. You see only their heads and shoulders because the lower half of the door is shut. HUGH beckons to somebody behind him, and BETTY comes up. She is followed presently by LADY TEDDING, MARGARET, PHILIP and SIR HENRY. There they stand, all of them, grouped round the opening, listening to the

woman's song. The men are wearing overcoats, the women cloaks. BETTY's cloak is of grey velvet.

WOMAN

And who d'you think were on the ship,
Were on the ship, were on the ship,
And who d'you think were on the ship
But Joseph and his Fair Lady.

O he did whistle and she did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring
For joy; our Saviour Christ was born
On Christmas Day in the morning.

HUGH

[*After a pause*] May we come in?

WOMAN

[*Starting to her feet*] Who's that? [*Gaping at them over the top of the wood-stack, her baby clutched to her bosom*] Oh! . . .

HUGH

[*Pushing the door open and coming forward, smiling and friendly*] Good evening. We've come to wish you ——

WOMAN

[*Turning and giving the sleeping man a kick*]

Joe! Joe! Wake up! Here's a lot of ladies and gen'lemen!

MAN

[*Rubbing his eyes, sitting up, and then struggling to his feet*] All right! All right! What's the matter? [*When he sees the others*] Oh!

LADY T.

[*Advancing in her best charity manner*] Good evening, my man. I hope you're comfortable here.

MAN

[*Touching his forehead*] Thank you, ma'am; yes, thank you, ma'am.

WOMAN

It's very kind of you, ma'am, to let us sleep here.

LADY T.

[*Looking about her*] You seem to have made yourselves comfortable. That's right. Is that candle safe? You must be careful not to set the wood alight.

WOMAN

Oh yes, ma'am, we'll be very careful. We're very grateful to you, ma'am.

PHILIP

[*To SIR HENRY*] Nice and cosy in here, isn't it?

[*To the man, jovially*] I expect you've slept in far worse places than this.

BETTY *stands aloof, watching the woman intently.*

JOY

[*To the woman, gently*] Sit down, won't you? I'm sure you're tired.

WOMAN

[*Gratefully*] Thank you, ma'am. [*She resumes her seat on the straw and her rocking of the baby.*]

HUGH

[*Looking down at her, smiling*] We don't want to disturb you. We only came to wish you a merry Christmas, you know.

WOMAN

[*Responding to his friendliness with a frank smile*] And the same to you, sir, if I may say so.

HUGH

[*Putting a pound note in her lap*] May I give you that? To wish you luck, because it's Christmas. . . .

WOMAN

[*Surprised and delighted*] Oh, sir! Thank you, thank you indeed, sir! May God reward you, sir!

BETTY

[*Coming forward, rather shyly*] Where did you learn that song? The one you were singing when we came in.

WOMAN

Oh, my mother taught me that, ma'am. It's pretty, isn't it?

BETTY

Yes. . . . You've got a nice voice.

HUGH

Will you sing it again? Just the last part—do!

WOMAN

With pleasure, sir. [*She sings, rocking the baby*]

And who d'you think were on the ship,
Were on the ship, were on the ship,
And who d'you think were on the ship
But Joseph and his Fair Lady.

O he did whistle and she did sing,
And all the bells on earth did ring
For joy; our Saviour Christ was born
On Christmas Day in the morning.

BETTY

[*Gravely*] Thank you.

HUGH

A jolly good tune, isn't it?

MARGARET

[*Pressing up, kindly but peremptorily*] Let me see your baby. Boy or girl?

WOMAN

[*Proudly*] A boy, ma'am!

SIR HENRY and PHILIP are talking to the man, putting him through a kind of catechism on his past history, present conduct, and future behaviour.

MARGARET

[*Peering at the child*] Hmm! It looks healthy. But you don't keep it very clean.

WOMAN

[*Politely, but with resentment in her eyes*] It isn't easy to get hot water, tramping about as we are.

LADY T.

[*Feeling she ought to be taking an interest*] No; it must be very difficult for you sometimes.

MARGARET

You oughtn't to drag a baby about like this, sleeping in barns and places. In the winter, too!

WOMAN

I know, ma'am. But I can't help it.

MARGARET

Why don't you go to the workhouse?

WOMAN

[*Decidedly*] No, thank you, no workhouse for me.

MARGARET

Why not?

WOMAN

You might as well be in prison as one o' them places. Asking you questions, as though you'd done something wrong. . . .

LADY T.

What a peculiar idea! It's for people like you that workhouses are provided. [*To MARGARET*] Aren't these people funny, my dear?

WOMAN

[*Respectfully*] You wouldn't say it was funny, ma'am, not if you'd lived in a workhouse.

LADY T.

I've been inside one. A very nice place, bright and clean. I thought it was most attractive.

WOMAN

Oh yes, they're nice enough like that—to look at.

MARGARET

A roof over your head, regular meals, and a warm

bed to sleep in—isn't that better than tramping about?

WOMAN

[*Firmly*] No, ma'am.

MARGARET

What an extraordinary woman you are!

PHILIP *comes forward to listen.*

WOMAN

Some folk are made different, I suppose. They don't mind. But it rubs me right up—being interfered with.

PHILIP

My good woman, then how can you expect people to help you?

WOMAN

I don't expect them to, sir. But I'm grateful when they do.

LADY T.

You make life so hard for yourself, being independent like this.

WOMAN

Of course, it's rough at times; that's true, ma'am. But it's your own roughness, if you understand me. It's better than having a lot of people interfering

with you, telling you when to have a bath and how to blow your nose.

MARGARET

[*Sharply*] What nonsense!

WOMAN

[*Politely*] I'm sorry you think that.

MARGARET

At any rate, if you don't trouble about yourself, you ought to think of your child. It's not right to take it about with you like this. It's not healthy. You ought to put it into a home till you are in a position to look after it.

WOMAN

[*Indignantly*] Put my baby in a home! Send him away! [*Hugging him close at the mere suggestion*]. I wouldn't part with him for nobody.

Why — [*Breaking off and smiling*] Anybody 'ud know you hadn't had a baby, ma'am.

JOY *smiles at HUGH, who can hardly contain his laughter.*

BETTY *stares at the woman as though mesmerised.*

MARGARET

[*Angry*] You're a very stupid woman. Very stupid!

PHILIP *touches her arm, signing to her to come away.*

LADY T.

[*Turning away*] Very rude!

MARGARET

[*Moving towards the door*] I've no patience with that type.

There is a distant rumble of thunder.

JOY

What was that?

MARGARET

[*Pricking up her ears*] There, Henry! What did I tell you! Thunder!

They all turn to the door, listening, with the exception of BETTY, who still gazes at the woman.

HENRY

Humph! How extraordinary! I suppose it was. . . .

PHILIP

Did you see that?

HUGH

What? Lightning?

PHILIP

Yes. [*Pointing out*] Over there.

MAN

I've been expecting it all day, sir. We're in for a storm right enough.

There is another rumble of thunder, still distant.

BETTY

[*Touching the woman's arm*] May I see your baby? I won't disturb him.

WOMAN

[*Opening her arms to let BETTY see*] Certainly, ma'am.

There is a flash of lightning.

LADY T.

[*Startled*] Oh!

WOMAN

[*To BETTY, smiling proudly*] Ain't he bonny?

There is a clap of thunder.

WOMAN

Oh my! [*She draws the shawl close about the baby's head.*]

SIR HENRY

[*Starting to go out*] Come along. We shall have to be quick.

BETTY

[*Leaning over the woman*] The little darling! . . .

There is a sharp patter of rain outside.

HUGH

Here it comes!

A vivid flash of lightning splits the darkness outside, followed almost immediately by a crash of thunder.

Those who are standing in the doorway draw back towards the right-hand wall, as though to get out of the line of fire. They shout to one another, but their voices are drowned by the thunder.

BETTY stands beside the woman, who crouches over her baby, rocking it backwards and forwards. The man comes forward and stands close behind his wife, protectingly.

Quick on the heels of the dying thunder comes another flash and another explosion, and another and another. And the rain pours down like a sheet of water. It seems to go on for ages, increasing each moment in fury, so that even the self-possessed Joy

begins to get scared. Lightning and thunder and wind and rain, blinding, deafening, terrifying, majestic—like the wrath of God.

At last there is a flash before which all others were as mere flickers—a flash that seems to split the sky in twain and consume the earth with fearful brilliance. But no thunder follows it.

Involuntarily, one and all, they cover their eyes with their hands, and BETTY falls face forward onto the ground as though struck. A rushing wind sweeps through the barn, the candles go out and there is impenetrable darkness. As if by magic the rain stops, and with the darkness there is deathly silence.

Then, almost imperceptibly at first, a strange unearthly light begins to creep over the scene, coming from above; and the ear catches a faint far-away sound of music. Very gradually the light increases and the music steals nearer: the sound of a multitude singing “Adeste Fideles,” accompanied by stringed instruments:

BLIND

'O come, all ye faithful,
Joyful and triumphant,
O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem;
Come and behold Him
Born, the King of Angels —

And then, the light increasing, you see (where the man and woman were) Our Lady, clothed in a robe of blue and gold, with the King of Angels in her arms and Saint Joseph by her side. On her head is a crown, and He who lies at her breast is encircled by a halo of glory. Beside her (where BETTY was) there kneels a girl dressed in scarlet, her hands clasped, her head bowed in adoration of The Child.

On the right, like creatures in a dream, stand LADY TEDDING, SIR HENRY, PHILIP, MARGARET, JOY, and HUGH. They make no movement, utter no sound; they just stand and stare.

Steadily the light grows brighter, so that every nook and cranny of the barn is revealed as never before. And around the Woman and the Babe there is a radiance as

from the sun at noonday. The air vibrates with the song of the angels.

Our Lady, Saint Joseph, and the kneeling girl are as large as life, as clear and unmistakable as a char-à-banc on a country road. There are no dim outlines or mystifying half-lights about them. In HUGH's phrase, they are "as glaring as electric light." It is the TEDDING family, standing apart, goggle-eyed with amazement, who are unreal and dream-like.

*O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the
Lord.*

*God of God,
Light of Light,
Lo! He abhors not the Virgin's
womb;
Very God,
Begotten, not created;
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,*

BLIND

O come, let us adore Him, Christ the
Lord.

Sing, choirs of Angels,
Sing in exultation,
Sing, all ye citizens of Heav'n above;
Glory to God
In the highest;
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him,
O come, let us adore Him, Christ the
Lord.

With the last note of "Lord" the scene is plunged into pitch darkness, and simultaneously there is a terrific thunderclap, which seems to shake the foundations of the earth. And the rain pours down like a sheet of water. On and on rolls the thunder, cracking and breaking and roaring like a salvo of heavy artillery, until it finally dies away in a distant rumble. The rain is stopping. There is tense silence.

Suddenly HUGH's voice is heard sharply in the darkness.

HUGH

For God's sake somebody strike a match!

There is a sound of fumbling, and a match is struck—by the man.

MAN

[Shielding the flame and lighting a candle] My word! that was a terrible flash! *[Lighting the other candle]* A terrible flash!

They all stand gaping at the man and woman with white, frightened faces, all except BETTY, who lies face downwards on the ground beside the woman, who is rocking her baby backwards and forwards.

HUGH

[With a cry] My God! Betty! Look! *[He rushes forward and bends over her, calling her name excitedly]* Betty! Betty! What's the matter? *[Getting no response]* Oh! My God!

With an exclamation of fear the woman starts to her feet. The man snatches the candle from off the wood-stack and goes to BETTY. The rest come clustering round, terrified.

LADY T.

Oh, she hasn't been struck?

PHILIP

This is terrible!

MARGARET

Chafe her hands! Fetch some water!

SIR HENRY

For God's sake get her back to the house!

HUGH

She's breathing! She's breathing!

JOY

It's only a faint, I think.

MARGARET

Get back! Get back! Give her air!

SIR HENRY

For God's sake get her back to the house.

LADY T.

Fetch a doctor, fetch a doctor at once!

HUGH

The storm's over. Come on! Here, Uncle Philip, you take her feet.

JOY

I'll go and telephone for the doctor.

She runs out.

LADY T.

[*As they pick BETTY up*] Oh, gently, gently. . . .

MARGARET

Only a faint, I think.

SIR HENRY

[*All to pieces*] I hope so, I hope so!

HUGH and PHILIP carry BETTY out, followed by LADY TEDDING, MARGARET and SIR HENRY.

The man and woman stand watching them go.

END OF ACT II



ACT III

THE Scene is the hall. Across the back hang two tapestry curtains, drawn close together. They hide the staircase and the way through to the servants' quarters. The walls to left and right are of panelled oak. On the right there is an archway leading to the outer hall and front door; and on the left a smaller archway leading to the dining room and other parts of the ground floor. The room is furnished with a large Chesterfield sofa, armchairs, tables, rugs, etc. A tray of drinks and glasses, a box of cigars, and a box of cigarettes stand on one of the tables. Books and magazines are lying about. There is a large

standard electric lamp, and on one of the small tables a reading lamp; both alight.

Presently you hear the front door being shut and a confused sound of voices and shuffling feet. Then through the archway on the right come HUGH and PHILIP carrying BETTY, followed by LADY TEDDING, MARGARET and SIR HENRY. They lay BETTY down on the sofa.

LADY T.

[Snatching cushions from the chairs] Cushions! Make her comfortable! *[She goes to put them under BETTY's head.]*

MARGARET

[Stopping her] No, no! She must lie flat! quite flat!

SIR HENRY

[Making for the tray of drinks] Give her some brandy. . . .

MARGARET

[Stopping him] No, no! The very worst thing! A little water—nothing more.

Joy comes in from the left, followed by PERRY.

PHILIP

[Patting her hands] Poor little Betty!

LADY T.

[*Suddenly*] Eau de Cologne! Of course! Eau de Cologne! [*She makes for the stairs.*]

HUGH

[*Excitedly*] She's coming round!

LADY T.

[*Rushing back to BETTY*] Oh!
They all lean over BETTY intently.

BETTY

[*Still unconscious, sighs and begins to sing, softly, uncertainly*] O come, let us adore Him, O come, let us adore — [*She breaks off with a low, happy laugh, rather like the gurgle of a contented child. Then she says, quietly and suddenly*] The little darling. . . . [*Sighs again*] My baby. . . .
The rest look at one another with scared faces.

LADY T.

[*Agitated*] Oh dear! What is the matter with her? [*Noticing PERRY*] Oh. . . . It's all right, Perry. We'll ring if we want you.

PERRY

Very good, my lady.
He goes out through the curtains.

SIR HENRY

[*To Joy*] Did you telephone for the doctor?

JOY

Yes.

SIR HENRY

[*Impatiently*] He ought to be here by now; he ought to be here. . . .

JOY

[*To LADY TEDDING*] Don't you think it would be better if we took her upstairs?

LADY T.

Yes, yes! Take her up to her bedroom.

HUGH

All right. [*He puts his arms under Betty's shoulders and motions to PHILIP to take her feet.*] Come on. . . . Ready? Right!

They lift her up from the sofa. JOY pulls back the left-hand curtain (exposing the bottom steps and balustrade of the staircase, some few feet beyond the curtain) and they carry BETTY out. LADY TEDDING follows them. JOY drops the curtain as they begin to mount the stairs.

The other two watch them go. Then SIR

HENRY *comes forward and pours out a strong brandy and soda.*

SIR HENRY

A little brandy, Margaret?

MARGARET

[*Needing it, but resolute*] No, thank you, Henry.

[*She sits down wearily*]

SIR HENRY

[*Remembering Prohibition*] Oh, of course! I forgot.

JOY

You can give me some, father. Strong.

MARGARET

[*Protesting mechanically*] Brandy, Joy! At your age!

JOY

[*Abruptly, looking from one to the other*] Did you see anything?

SIR HENRY

[*Stops in the act of pouring out a drink for her and looks up with a startled, nervous expression*]

What—what do you mean?

JOY

What I say. Did you see anything . . . in the barn?

MARGARET

[Getting up and moving about the room, agitated]

I can't understand it; I can't understand it. . . .

SIR HENRY

[Vehemently] I don't believe it!

JOY

[Looking from one to the other] You did see it, then?

SIR HENRY

Imagination! Pure imagination!

JOY

But if we all saw —— *[She stops, listening. There is the sound of a car drawing up to the front door.]* That's the doctor!

She hurries out to the right.

SIR HENRY *takes a long drink.*

MARGARET

[Shaking her head] I can't understand it. . . .

PERRY *comes through the curtains and goes out to the right.*

MARGARET

I can see it now . . . so vivid, so . . . so real!

You hear the door being shut and a murmur of conversation: Joy's voice and the Doctor's.

DOCTOR'S

VOICE

[*Approaching*] —Yes, a frightful storm.

Joy comes in with the doctor, who is wearing an overcoat and carrying a small leather bag. PERRY follows with the doctor's hat and gloves.

SIR HENRY

Good evening.

DOCTOR

Good evening, Sir Henry.

They shake hands.

PERRY puts the hat and gloves on a chair.

SIR HENRY

I expect my daughter has told you ——

DOCTOR

[*Taking off his overcoat, assisted by PERRY*] Yes.

SIR HENRY

Of course, it may be only a fainting fit. The storm—shock—that sort of thing. But—well, you'll be able to tell us.

DOCTOR

Yes. [*To Joy, bag in hand*] Upstairs?

JOY

[*Taking him to the curtains*] This way, Doctor.

They pass through the curtains and you hear them mount the stairs.

SIR HENRY *pours himself out another drink.*

MARGARET

[*Sitting down*] Of course, there must be an explanation for it. But . . . [*Leaning forward*] What exactly did you see, Henry?

SIR HENRY

[*Staring into space*] I saw . . . [*Pulling himself together*] No, no! It's preposterous! The storm . . . the lightning . . . our nerves were on edge.

MARGARET

[*Slowly, solemnly*] The Virgin Mary!

SIR HENRY

[*Excitedly*] Yes! With a crown on her head! Did you see that?

MARGARET

[*Laughing nervously*] Of course it's ridiculous. But—but how do you explain it?

SIR HENRY

[*Throwing up his hands*] I don't know! How do you explain a nightmare?

MARGARET

[*Reflectively*] I don't know, but it might be explained by Suggestion. What we saw ——

SIR HENRY

But the music! the singing! How do you account for that?

MARGARET

[*Nonplussed*] The singing . . . [*Making a discovery*] Ah! It was what those boys sang—those carol singers. You remember? [*She hums the tune of "Adeste fideles."*]

SIR HENRY

But Betty—just now—she sang it! It—it's incomprehensible!

MARGARET

[*Thinking it out*] The storm upset the balance of our minds—that's obvious. The subconscious overwhelmed the conscious. That hymn we heard before dinner—the carol singers . . . rejected by the conscious mind, but retained in the subconscious, and in a moment of stress, of emotional excitement, thrown up and—and dominating the

conscious. Yes, I think I'm beginning to understand it.

PHILIP and HUGH enter through the curtains.

SIR HENRY

[*Eagerly*] How is she?

HUGH

Still unconscious.

SIR HENRY

Still?

PHILIP

But quite quiet . . . breathing naturally! Really one would think she were asleep instead of in a faint. The colour has come back to her cheeks and . . . [*Giving it up*] It's extraordinary!

MARGARET

What does the doctor think?

HUGH

[*Shrugging his shoulders*] He doesn't! He's as mystified as we are. Her pulse is normal, her heart's all right. There isn't a sign of anything being wrong with her at all.

PHILIP

Nothing at all—just quietly unconscious!

SIR HENRY

[*Overcome*] What is it? This—Betty—and
——!? [*Looking from one to the other with a
scared expression*] Did you see anything?

HUGH

[*Excitedly*] Yes! Did you?

MARGARET

[*Pressing her hands together*] Amazing! Did
Edith?

PHILIP

[*Solemnly*] Yes. We all saw. . . .

SIR HENRY

[*In a whisper*] The Virgin Mary . . . with
Christ!

PHILIP

Yes. . . . extraordinary! [*He sinks into a
chair.*]

HUGH

Then—then we all saw the same thing!

SIR HENRY

And the music!

PHILIP

That well-known hymn!

HUGH

Yes, yes!

MARGARET

[*Full of enlightenment*] The carol singers before dinner! [*To PHILIP*] Don't you see? [*To HENRY*] Don't you see?

SIR HENRY

I've seen quite enough, thank you! [*He goes to get himself another drink.*]

HUGH

[*Softly, with a far-away look*] Unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given. . . .

PHILIP

[*Leaning forward*] Henry, will you give me something—a little brandy or whisky.

SIR HENRY

A good strong brandy and soda, that's ——

PHILIP

Oh no, no! Not too strong!

HUGH

[*Pointing, as though the figures were there before him*] The Virgin—with Saint Joseph beside her ——

SIR HENRY

[*His nerves on edge*] Oh, stop that, Hugh! [*He hands PHILIP a drink.*]

MARGARET

[*Watching HUGH*] It's wonderful how the imagination works.

HUGH

[*Turning to her indignantly*] But I saw them!

PHILIP

[*Gravely*] So did we all. [*He takes a sip from his glass.*]

MARGARET

[*Jumping round on him*] You don't believe . . . ?

PHILIP

. . . in our imagination, of course. That is the remarkable thing about it: we *all* conjured up the same picture, so to speak.

HUGH

But if we all saw it—and heard it? Surely it happened? We couldn't all imagine it! All of us! The same thing! At the same time!

PHILIP

My dear Hugh, what do you mean? You don't believe that—that it *actually happened*?

HUGH

[*Bewildered*] I—I don't know. It might have been ——

MARGARET

Rubbish!

PHILIP

[*Indulgently*] Come, come, my dear boy!

HUGH

It—it might have been a miracle.

MARGARET

A miracle! Magic! What next!

SIR HENRY

[*Feeling better after so much brandy*] You might as well believe in ghosts!

PHILIP

You see, the whole idea of—of the thing was superstitious. The Virgin with a crown—the bright light! It was all too obviously prompted by our imaginations. The traditional picture of the Nativity. A picture which comes involuntarily to our minds when we think of Christmas—because all the great artists of the world have depicted it like that. A beautiful conception, but, as we all know, quite untrue.

HUGH

[*Impatiently*] You mean to say ——

LADY TEDDING *comes through the curtains,*
followed by the DOCTOR and JOY.
The rest turn to them eagerly.

SIR HENRY

Well? How is she?

LADY T.

Conscious at last, and apparently quite well!

DOCTOR

Yes, she's perfectly well. There's nothing to worry about at all.

PHILIP

Splendid!

HUGH

[*Quietly*] Thank God.

PHILIP

Splendid!

DOCTOR

And, frankly, I'm at a loss to account for it. I mean, it wasn't an ordinary faint.

MARGARET

[*Getting up*] That's exactly what I noticed!

ACT III

III

DOCTOR

The usual symptoms were absent altogether. As far as appearances went, she might have been asleep.

PHILIP

[*To* SIR HENRY] Just what I told you!

LADY T.

She came round like a child waking up, rubbing her eyes and smiling.

SIR HENRY

Extraordinary!

MARGARET

[*To the* DOCTOR] You can't account for it at all?

DOCTOR

Well, of course, it was due to shock, being out in that fearful storm. But the form it took—that I can't account for.

PHILIP

It was a terrible thunderstorm.

SIR HENRY

Well, I'm very glad it's nothing serious. It's a great relief to us. We—well, at first we thought she'd been struck.

MARGARET *sits down.*

DOCTOR

[*Picking up his overcoat*] Yes, it must have been a nasty shock for you. [*To HUGH, who helps him into his coat*] Thank you.

SIR HENRY

[*Suddenly*] Oh, won't you have a whisky and soda before you go?

DOCTOR

No, thank you.

LADY T.

You are quite sure there's nothing to worry about now?

DOCTOR

[*Taking up his hat and gloves*] Nothing at all! She's as right as rain. . . . Good-bye, Lady Tedding.

LADY T.

[*Shaking hands with him*] Good-bye. Thank you so much.

SIR HENRY

I'll see you to the door.

DOCTOR

[*Bowing to the others*] Good-bye.

They all murmur good-bye. The DOCTOR and SIR HENRY go out to the right.

ACT III

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LADY T.

[*Sitting down, with a sigh of weary relief*] Oh dear!

MARGARET

You must be quite tired, Edith, after all this.

LADY T.

I am. [*To HUGH*] Give me a little brandy, will you, dear? With water.

HUGH *pours out the drink.*

PHILIP

Well, I must say it's a great relief, a great relief! Poor little Betty. . . .

MARGARET

She's gone to bed, I hope?

LADY T.

Yes. [*As HUGH hands her the drink*] Thank you, dear.

PHILIP

[*Pondering*] Of course that doctor doesn't know—a country practitioner. . . . But I cannot help feeling that there's some connection in all this—Betty fainting and what we all—er—all experienced out in that barn.

SIR HENRY *returns.*

JOY

[*Attentively*] What we saw?

MARGARET

[*Correctingly*] What we thought we saw.

LADY T.

[*Agitated*] Oh, what was it? The woman—she seemed to become ——

SIR HENRY

Nonsense! Nonsense!

JOY

Did you notice? The thunder came afterwards, after what we saw. It all happened between a flash and a thunderclap. And yet it seemed to last for ages.

SIR HENRY

[*Pooh-poohing*] We were blinded by the lightning—thoroughly upset—that's what it was.

HUGH *helps himself to a whisky and soda.*
Then sits down in a corner away from the others.

JOY

I thought we'd all been killed and got to heaven. I was thankful when I heard you say, "Strike a match," Hugh.

ACT III

115

SIR HENRY

I can't think how we were all so silly as to—as to . . . Anyhow, it's all over now.

MARGARET

It just shows what a dangerous thing the imagination can be.

PHILIP

Yes.

JOY

Oh, I'm sure I didn't imagine it.

MARGARET

[*Irritably*] Then what was it, if you didn't imagine it?

JOY

[*Shrugging her shoulders*] I don't know. Give it up.

LADY T.

It was that woman with a baby—the attitude of her—you know what I mean.

MARGARET

Of course! The three of them, just like the Bible story, in a stable on Christmas Eve.

PHILIP

Yes. A really striking resemblance.

MARGARET

After all, there is nothing very remarkable about it. We all know what funny tricks our imagination can play, especially when under the influence of some abnormal excitement. Think of the War. The absurd ideas people got—wanting to make peace too soon, and that sort of thing. Even the men, the soldiers. Really, some of them were quite unbalanced after a few weeks in the trenches. And we—just for a moment, in that fearful storm—we were all just a little unbalanced, just a little. Subconsciously we had noted the resemblance that woman with her child bore to—to the popular Christmas superstition. Then the storm came. A shock to our nervous system. Imagination for a moment ran wild. And a chance subconscious impression assumed, just for a second, the guise of reality.

They are all impressed by this explanation, even HUGH

JOY

[*Slowly*] I hadn't thought of it like that.

PERRY *comes in.*

MARGARET

But if you went down to that barn now, you'd

find it difficult to capture even that first slight impression. The *unexpectedness* would be gone. You know now exactly what you'd see. The dark barn, with the candles flickering, and that woman with her child, sitting there on the straw, just the same. A common tramp.

SIR HENRY

Yes, Perry?

PERRY

I thought I'd better tell you, sir. Those people have gone.

SIR HENRY

What? What people?

PERRY

Those tramps, sir—the woman with the baby. I've just been down to the barn. There isn't a trace of them. They've gone—vanished, sir.

SIR HENRY

[*Voicing the general amazement*] Vanished?

PERRY

Yes, sir. But I think it's all right, sir. There's nothing missing.

SIR HENRY

Did ——?

MARGARET

Didn't anybody see them go?

LADY T.

Without saying a word or—or anything?

PERRY

No, my lady. It's most mysterious. I went down there, just to see if they were all right ——

JOY

When?

PERRY

Just now.

SIR HENRY

Yes?

PERRY

There was nobody there. The blankets I gave them were lying on the ground, neatly folded, just as if they'd never been touched. I went all round outside—down the drive as far as the lodge—but not a trace of them anywhere. They've simply vanished, sir.

MARGARET

[*After a pause, wriggling her shoulders as though to shake off something*] Just what I thought—suspicious characters.

ACT III

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HUGH

[*With sarcasm*] Perhaps we imagined them, too!

PERRY

Imagined, sir?

SIR HENRY

[*Dismissing him*] That's all right. That'll do, Perry.

PERRY

Yes, sir. [*He goes out.*]

MARGARET

[*Briskly*] I hope the woman has taken my advice and gone to the workhouse.

HUGH

[*Derisively*] In the middle of the night!

JOY

[*Shivering*] It makes me feel all goosey.

MARGARET

[*Snapping at her*] Don't be silly!

LADY T.

[*Nervously*] It's very odd. . . .

PHILIP

[*Reassuring himself*] Tramps—you never know what they're going to do. I expect they've gone on to beg somewhere else.

SIR HENRY

[*Glad to seize on any explanation*] Yes, of course! Tramps—they'll do anything.

HUGH

[*Getting up; rather aggressively*] I don't care what you say, you can't explain it. We all saw something—something supernatural. It wasn't just imagination. It couldn't be!

SIR HENRY

Rubbish!

MARGARET

Really, Hugh!

LADY T.

It was that woman, dear—I'm sure it was—with the baby and the man standing beside her, just as you see in pictures.

PHILIP

Yes, and the atmosphere of the place. The candles flickering, the rafters, the straw on the ground. . . .

JOY

[*Laughing*] A pretty Christmas-card effect!

MARGARET

[*Seriously*] Yes—that was it!

ACT III

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LADY T.

On Christmas Eve, too!

SIR HENRY

And after all that talk about religion ——

JOY

Did you notice that the woman called the man Joe?

PHILIP

No! Did she? That's most interesting! Of course! Saint Joseph suggested to the mind at once!

LADY T.

And she wore a blue handkerchief on her head! You know—blue—the Madonna. You always see it in pictures.

MARGARET

Yes. It's really perfectly clear when you study the facts. All these things have a simple, natural explanation when you come to analyse them. It was quite obviously a case of collective hypnotic suggestion.

JOY

What!?

MARGARET

Collective hypnotic suggestion.

JOY

But who hypnotised us?

MARGARET

We hypnotised ourselves.

HUGH

Well I'm damned!

PHILIP

No, I don't think that, Margaret. To establish such a theory you would have to suppose that we were *willing* the picture, consciously striving to imagine it. I am more inclined to think that the real explanation will be found in what the psychologists call Inherited Instincts.

MARGARET

[*Scornfully*] Inherited instincts! Why, that's an exploded theory! The most advanced psychologists will tell you nowadays that all instincts are fundamental to our nature. They are not inherited at all.

HUGH

Just a minute. Will you tell me why Betty was kneeling with her hands clasped together in front of the woman or the Virgin Mary or whoever it was? Did we imagine that, too?

They all turn to him, exclaiming together.

LADY T.

Betty?

JOY

That wasn't Betty!

SIR HENRY

What next?

PHILIP

[*Thoughtfully*] The kneeling figure . . . yes.

MARGARET

[*Sharply*] Betty was in our minds at the time: that's how it was. The woman with a baby and— and Betty with a baby and ——

HUGH

[*Laughing*] Oh, don't tell me that Betty is imaginary, too!

PHILIP

The figure I—er—imagined was that of the Magdalene. I once saw a picture like that—in Italy somewhere. I remember—Mary Magdalene in the foreground, dressed in scarlet.

JOY

Betty was wearing a red dress!

SIR HENRY

Oh, this is nonsense!

LADY T.

But she had a cloak on! A grey velvet cloak!

SIR HENRY

That proves it wasn't Betty.

HUGH

Then where was Betty?

LADY T.

Standing beside me!

JOY

No, she wasn't. She wasn't with us.

SIR HENRY

Of course she was!

PHILIP

No, I don't think so.

SIR HENRY

Yes, yes, she was!

JOY

[*Remembering suddenly*] Why, she fainted before it happened! I remember ——

MARGARET

The whole thing was imagination. We were thinking of Betty and—and we imagined her ——

PHILIP

Yes, yes, it was all *in our minds*.

HUGH

[*Laughing*] In our minds! Oh, my God!

BETTY *comes in through the curtains, unnoticed by the others. She stands listening to HUGH, with a smile on her lips. Her manner is no longer nervous or hysterical; on the contrary, it is restful, calm, assured. She is wearing her red dress.*

HUGH

You'll be saying next that Betty wasn't in the barn at all, wasn't lying on the ground in a faint, isn't upstairs in her bedroom now!

BETTY

[*Laughing softly*] She isn't.

With exclamations of surprise they all turn to her.

JOY

[*Jumping up*] Betty!

SIR HENRY

Good God!

LADY T.

[*Going to her*] My dear! . . .

MARGARET

We thought you'd gone to bed!

LADY T.

Up and dressed like this! Whatever for, Betty?

BETTY

[*Without moving*] I've come to tell you something. . . . I'm going to keep my baby.

SIR HENRY

What!?

LADY T.

[*Trembling*] But you said . . .

BETTY

I know. I said you could send him away. I'm sorry. I made a mistake.

SIR HENRY

Good God! You can't!

LADY T.

You don't know what you're saying. You—you're overwrought. Go back to bed, dear.

BETTY

No, mother, I'm perfectly all right. I know what I'm saying, and I mean it. I'm going to keep my baby.

LADY T.

Betty!

BETTY

I'm sorry, mother. I'm sorry to give you pain,

ACT III

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to do what you don't want me to do. But I must. You see, it isn't what we feel about it—you, or me, or any of us; it isn't what we want. It's just that—that I have a baby.

SIR HENRY

We thrashed all that out. You heard what Philip said. He ought to know.

BETTY

Yes, father; but it's something different. It's not just a matter of keeping my baby or sending him away. It's not that at all. Don't you see? I can't get rid of him by sending him away. He's my baby. Nothing can alter that. He's part of me, and I belong to him. I can't escape from him—any more than I can escape from God.

LADY T.

It was nothing but imagination, really, dear. You mustn't go thinking ——

BETTY

[*Puzzled*] Imagination? What, mother?

LADY T.

What you saw—what you thought you saw in that barn.

BETTY

[*Still puzzled*] What?

MARGARET

During the storm.

BETTY

I don't know what you mean. I saw the woman with her baby. [*Wrinkling her brows, perplexed by some elusive memory*] Was it a baby? He spoke to me . . . such a sweet voice. . . . No, I can't remember.

SIR HENRY

Look here, Betty. You're upset. You've been ill. Go back to bed and have a good sleep. You'll think differently in the morning.

BETTY [*Resolutely*]

No, father. I can't let my baby go. I know I'm right.

SIR HENRY

[*Flaring up*] Right? You know? You dare to stand there and tell me ——

LADY T.

Henry, Henry!

SIR HENRY

I suppose you were right to get the baby!

BETTY

[*Still quiet and controlled*] I've been immoral, I know that, father. But I should be worse if I let

him go. I can't explain, but I do know, father. It's something truer than anything else in the world, something I've only just understood. I can't explain to you, but—but I must keep my baby. I must.

JOY

[*Gently*] Don't be a fool, Betty.

MARGARET

My dear child—think!

LADY T.

[*Sinking into a chair*] I can't bear it! The scandal, the disgrace!

BETTY

I'm sorry, mother. I'll go away—abroad somewhere. I'll do anything you want. But I must keep my baby. I didn't want him. When he was coming, I wanted to kill him. I—I couldn't. And now . . . I can't send him away. I know it was very wrong. I know the disgrace. I am sorry, mother, really. But can't you see? It's something greater than my feelings, or your feelings, or what people think and say. It . . . it is my baby—mine!

LADY T.

I can't understand you!

SIR HENRY

I'll disown you! I'll have nothing more to do with you!

PHILIP

My dear Betty, don't deceive yourself. Don't be led away by—by a mere fancy. I can't see how you can imagine ——

MARGARET

I can't see how you can think like this at all.

HUGH

[*Passionately*] No! You can't see! None of you! You can't see that Betty's right because you can't see anything that's simple and human and obvious. You can't see because you won't see. You won't see anything you don't like. Your eyes are stuffed up with pride and prejudice. You're as blind as a lot of bats. You can't see God when He comes in glory or when He comes as a little child. You're blind! blind! blind!

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